**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chassidut**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #19: The Story of Moshe on High (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we began to engage with the Rabbinic account of Moshe’s encounter with God when he ascended Mount Sinai:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When Moshe ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and attaching crowns to the letters [of the Torah].

He said to Him: Master of the Universe, who is preventing You [from giving the Torah without these additions]?

God said to him: There is a man who is destined to live in many generations’ time, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name. He will derive from each and every thorn [of these crowns] mounds upon mounds of laws.

Moshe said to God: Master of the Universe, show him to me.

God said to him: Turn back behind you.

He went and sat at the end of the eighth row, and did not understand what they were saying. He grew weak. When [R. Akiva] started discussing a certain matter, his students said to him: Our teacher, from where do you know this? R. Akiva said to them: It is a halakha transmitted to Moshe from Sinai. When Moshe heard this, his mind was put at ease.

Moshe returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He. He said to Him: Master of the Universe, You have a man like this – and yet You are giving the Torah through me?

God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

Moshe said to God: Master of the Universe, You have shown me [Rabbi Akiva’s] Torah; show me his reward.

God said to him: Turn back behind you.

Moshe went back and saw that they were weighing Rabbi Akiva’s flesh in a butcher shop [*be-makkulin*].

He said to God: Master of the Universe, this is Torah and this is its reward?

God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me. (*Bavli, Menachot* 29b)

**“Yet You have made him little less than the angels”**

I showed in the previous *shiur* that the story comprises two main subjects, reflecting two fundamentally different – even diametrically opposite – experiences in man’s stance before God: on one hand, the empowering partnership that God offers man in the creation of Torah; on the other hand, the clear and categorical limitation that God places on man’s involvement in the workings of the world and human fate. These two aspects of the human experience – that of greatness and closeness to God, and that of smallness and paltriness – are expressed in consecutive verses in *Tehillim*:

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers; the moon and the stars, which You have established – **what is man**, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You think of him? **Yet You have made him little less than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor.** You have given him dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet: Sheep and oxen, all of them, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea; all that passes through the paths of the seas… (8:4-9)

A verse from this psalm infuses the experience that R. Nachman of Breslav describes in one of his shorter and lesser-known stories, entitled “The Story of the Test of the Combinations of Letters,” as well as in one of his well-known teachings. I believe the story maintains an interesting dialogue with the *midrash* about Moshe and R. Akiva:

I heard from R. David Tzvi, who heard from his grandfather, R. Yishaya Shalom *z”l*, that our Rabbi once told the following story:

I was in a certain place, and they gave me a test – I was to name all the letter combinations in the entire Torah, from ‘*Bereishit’* (‘In the beginning’) to ‘in the eyes of all of Israel’ [the end of *Sefer Devarim*]. So I answered the test, and then they gave me another test, in which I was to name all the letter combinations backwards, from ‘in the eyes of all of Israel’ to ‘*Bereishit*,’ and I answered that too.

Then they divided the Torah into two parts, and placed the second part at the beginning and the first part at the end. They told me to name the letter combinations, but I was not able to, and I was greatly ashamed (as when one gives a test to a good child, but he doesn’t know, and there are people present – he is ashamed). Then I recalled that every deficiency is a real deficiency, both in the material realm and in the spiritual realm, and this is the deeper meaning of the verse, “You have made him little less [i.e., deficient] than the angels [*mei-Elo-him*, which may also be translated as ‘from God’].” And I couldn’t serve God with joy. Then I said to myself: Who am I, that the King Himself tells me His deficiency, as it were; could there be any greater honor than this? And this itself brought me to great joy, and this is the meaning of, “You have crowned him with glory and honor” and with new insight. And then I said this reading. (Z. Mark, *Kol Sippurei R. Nachman mi-Breslav*, pp. 119-120)[[1]](#footnote-1)

The story describes R. Nachman’s experience of failure at a test, which put him in a place of deficiency and smallness. He is tested in various skills relating to “combinations of letters” in the Torah, reflecting mystical and magical abilities.[[2]](#footnote-2) He wants very much to succeed, and does indeed succeed at the first difficult challenges the testers present him with, but afterwards he finds himself a loss, in a state of deficiency. R. Nachman offers a radical revelation of the source of the deficiency: the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) itself. He reads the phrase *va-techasrehu me’at me-Elo-him*, translated above as “You have made him little less thanthe angels,” in a homiletic way: not that man is [merely] a little less than the angels, as the plain meaning suggests, but rather that the deficiency itself comes from God.[[3]](#footnote-3) God is the source of deficiency, for deficiency is to be found, as it were, in Him, too. While this statement is difficult for us to digest, it is almost unavoidable in the teachings of R. Nachman, since Divinity is essentially Infinity (*Einsof*), and Infinity includes everything – including the quality of deficiency. If we look at the various *sefirot*, reflecting the Divine qualities, the place where this quality of deficiency is manifest is the *sefira* of *Malkhut* – the Divine Presence, which is the expression of the manifestation of Divinity in our material world.

It would seem that the story of the test is at the background of the more well-known teaching #89 in *Likkutei Moharan*, which also discusses the principle of the existence of deficiency in the *Shekhina*:

“Yet You have made him little less than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor” (*Tehillim* 8): Behold, it is known that whatever a person lacks, whether spiritually or physically – the deficiency is in the Divine Presence, which is the aspect of Elo-him. Meaning, the fact that “You have made him less [or ‘deficient’]” is itself certainly “a little from Elo-him.” That is, the deficiency is certainly “from Elo-him,” i.e., in the Divine Presence. But when a person knows this – that the deficiency exists both above and below – he will certainly feel great sorrow and sadness, and so will not be able to serve God with joy. He must therefore tell himself: “What am I, and what is my life, that the King Himself informs me of His deficiency?! Is there any greater honor than this?” This brings him to great joy, and his intellect is renewed, and “You have crowned him with glory and honor” – meaning, it is by virtue of the glory and honor shown to him, in that the King Himself informs him of the want, that he is crowned with new insights.”

Here, too, R. Nachman describes the process that the subject undergoes, as in the last part of the story. He discovered that the deficiency that he experiences within himself has its source in the Divine Presence – or, to put it differently, that his deficiency is a reflection of a deficiency, or want, that exists in the Divine Presence, and then he is filled with sorrow and sadness over this lack.

**The Impact of Recognizing Deficiency Above**

The idea of a deficiency in the Divine Presence is also found in the teachings of Chassidic masters who preceded R. Nachman, such as his uncle, R. Efraim of Sadilkov, grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov:

As taught by our master, my great-grandfather… Everything comes from the Divine Presence, as it were, and a person should understand that all his deficiencies are [reflections of] deficiency in the Divine Presence, as it were… Therefore, in all his prayers he should pray that the deficiency of the Divine Presence, as it were, be filled, and then his own deficiency will be repaired… (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, *Parashat Toldot*)

R. Efraim uses the understanding that deficiency has its source in the *Shekhina* to shift the focus of prayer from one’s personal needs to what the *Shekhina* is lacking.

However, R. Nachman takes the same understanding in a completely different direction. In the process he describes, the discovery of the deficiency of the *Shekhina* via one’s own deficiencies propels him not to action (as in the teaching of *Degel Machaneh Efraim*) but rather to the next step in understanding the significance of this discovery. He manages to transcend the sorrow over the deficiency of the *Shekhina* and to achieve joy, with the help of the understanding that the *Shekhina* shares its sorrow and lack with him like a king who shares his sorrow and lacking with one of his subjects. The joy arises over the sharing, the closeness and connection; these overcome the sorrow. The very fact of intimacy between the King and His subject helps the subject to stand upright and fills him with positive energy. The experience shifts a person from observing the deficiency of someone else, from the outside – which, while arousing his sorrow, still preserves his separateness, which ultimately involves loneliness or alienation – to a sense of connection that breaks through the loneliness. This breaking of the loneliness arouses a joy that overpowers the sorrow that came from the discovery of the deficiency. The joy fills him with new energy and he even manages to “say the reading” – although at this stage, that achievement is of secondary importance to him. It is not that his joy emanates from his success, but rather that his success emanates from his joy. The success itself is no longer the priority; more important is the connection and intimacy, which bring him joy.

The story of the test of the combinations of letters includes the entire process. First, the person arrives at a sense of failure and feels sorrow at his own situation. At this stage, he is alone with his deficiency. He then moves to the next stage and sees that his deficiency is merely a reflection of a greater, more inherent deficiency of the world – a deficiency of the *Shekhina* – and this too causes him sorrow. Finally, he achieves a sense of partnership and connection, giving rise to joy that fills him and replaces the sense of failure and sadness over the deficiency of the *Shekhina*.

**R. Nachman and Moshe**

The transitions in this story – between togetherness and closeness, on one hand, and distance and alienation, on the other – echo the two different moods in the Talmudic story of Moshe Rabbeinu and R. Akiva.

Another interesting link between the two stories is the attention to the letters of the Torah, and the ability to create new things from them. While R. Akiva uses the letters to produce new Torah insights, R. Nachman is talking about partnership in the creation of the world. God created the world with “ten utterances” (*Avot* 5:1), and Kabbalistic sources describe the creation coming about through different combinations of Hebrew letters.[[4]](#footnote-4) In R. Nachman’s story, he undergoes an interesting process. At first, his “partnership” with the Creator assumes practical expression in the knowledge that he displays in the realm of letter combinations, which may give him the ability to imitate the act of Creation. But something in this partnership seems to break down, and he fails at the test. He becomes aware of his limitations in this realm – symbolizing the limitations and boundaries of the partnership. But in its stead, specifically from the place of deficiency, a new, different partnership is born, centering around a different value: the closeness itself between man and the Divine Presence, rather than the commonality of creative abilities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Nachman arrives at this closeness and partnership by taking another step: the deficiency, or lack of control, the state of limitation, is projected here onto God, because man is a reflection of God. So, at least in the manner in which God is revealed in this world – the *sefira* of *Malkhut* (to use Kabbalistic terms), or the Divine Presence – He also has some deficiency, of which man’s deficiency is a reflection. The discovery of this shared experience of deficiency creates a new and more intimate connection between man and God.

This line of thought recalls parts of our discussion in previous *shiurim* about the *midrash* concerning the moon. The moon, with its quality of deficiency, is also a symbol of the *sefira* of *Malkhut*, as well as of man, who is a reflection of the *Shekhina*. It is a symbol of man who is able to live with a consciousness of deficiency as a state that characterizes both life in this world and the revelation of the Divine within it – and views this deficiency as promoting connection and a real encounter with the other, God and fellow man.

Ultimately, this renewed connection restores R. Nachman’s ability to name the combinations of letters. However, as noted, at this stage it seems that the focus has already shifted, and the relationship with God has reached a different, deeper place.

**The Narrative Experience**

Taking the two stories together, I find that there is added value to having this idea presented in the narrative form. Some of the ideas arising from the stories could be conveyed in a theoretical format. But what the story expresses, over and above the abstract idea, is the human experience bound up with the different states or stances before God and the connection and partnership with Him. In the story about Moshe, we “hear” the open dialogue of partnership in the first part, and the closed, impenetrable response in the second part, expressing the gap – the abyss – between God and man. We hear the changes overcoming Moshe – the weakening of his spirit and his recovery in the first part; the anguish of his protest in the second. His human experience in each part of the story is significant; through it, we experience the closeness to God and the distance from Him not just in terms of belief and faith, but as a relationship. Likewise in R. Nachman’s story, the theoretical statement “You have made him little less than the angels” is imbued with new life through the story, in which the readers experience – together with the narrator, R. Nachman himself – the full range of emotions: the sense of success and capability, even strength, at the beginning, the sense of distress and failure later on, and the warm and intimate connection that is created at the end.

We could have expanded on the ideas arising from the Talmudic story about Moshe via a range of sources from different periods. But the power of the story is best echoed and amplified through the other story. As I wrote in the introduction to this series, the very desire to tell a story, to touch on life with all its nuances, emotions, and experiences that transcend abstract ideas, is shared by *Chazal* and the Chassidic masters, and I believe they enrich each other.

We might also detect an interesting development from the discourse that arises in the Talmudic story to that of R. Nachman’s story. In the story of Moshe, we find a division into two realms: the realm of creativity in Torah, and the realm of understanding and determining how the world is run. In the first realm, God offers man a measure of partnership; in the second, He limits him. However, as mentioned, the structure of the story hints to the idea that sometimes the realms become intertwined; in this world, they cannot be fully and completely separated. The Chassidic story takes this idea in a different direction. It starts from the place of man’s involvement in the mystical combinations of letters, which points to some degree of partnership in Creation. But this partnership starts to crack, and in its place, there appears a partnership of intimacy and unmediated connection, which itself becomes the focus and the aim. The emphasis is no longer on man ascending to the level of the Creator, but rather on the *Shekhina* descending to man’s level, creating connection and intimacy.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. For further elaboration on this story and its connection with teaching #89 in *Likkutei Moharan* (which I discuss below), see Z. Mark, “*Mivchan Tzerufei ha-Otiot*,” *Da’at* 68/69 (5770), pp. 131-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See more on this below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Editor’s note: The verse *va-techasreihu me’at* ***mei-Elo-him*** is potentially ambiguous at two points: (a) *Elo-him* can refer to God or to angels; and (b) the Hebrew prefix *mem* can be translated as “from,” or, when it follows an adjective such as *me’at* (little), as a comparative (“less than”). The plain meaning of the verse is “You have made him little **less than** the **angels**”; R. Nachman, however, reads it as “You have made him little, **from God**.” This is explained further in the next source, including relating to the specific term *Elo-him*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Mark, ibid., p. 136, and the references in fn. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a view of the ability to combine letters as reducing the gap between God and man, and vice versa, cf. Mark, ibid. pp. 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)